

TAZRIAH/METZORA - A PANDEMIC OF A PARASHA

I know Pesach has already been packed away for another year, but in a twist from the famous Seder-night question, *“why is this year different from all others?”* Well, this year, the jokes we’re different!

My standard post-Pesach gag was to suggest sitting across from Glicks on a camp chair watching as the community *“hangrily”* fought over par-cooked, scoldingly hot bagels straight out of the oven...It’s a blood sport like no other.

This year I’m not in line at a bakery nor across the road... instead, I find myself part of a WhatsApp group called *“Friday Glicks Challah run”*. A hastily and haphazardly formed group of friends, family and neighbours doing their bit to protect one another.

Only thing is I’m not sure if we’re being protected from the hordes of yidden being funnelled down Carlisle St from Malvern, Bentleigh and Hawthorn Rd, or from being out during Covid19 restrictions. Either way I’m safely at home.

But rather than focus on difference, I’d prefer to find some sameness of thought, which of course brings me to this week’s Parasha.

Some 25 years ago, at the tender age of 13 standing atop a kindergarten stool in Mizrahi’s Beit Haroeh minyan - just to see over the bimah - My shrill high-pitched voice shook more from nervousness over giving my BarMitzvah speech, than from reading my Parasha, and fair enough too. The gory details of oozing skin infections, menstrual bleedings, bodily rashes, ejaculate and infectious skin discolorations, does good BarMitzvah speech content not make.

However, whilst reading through the Parasha this year the learnings and instructions on how the Torah handles those affected by disease and plague have of course this time brought new meaning.

The Tzara’at (often wrongly translated as leprosy) is said to be a physical skin affliction for spiritual disease. White spots and hairs covering your body, and afflicting your clothes and walls too, are not caused by 3 weeks of zoom meetings and home-schooling, but as an affliction for Lashon Hara.

A spiritual affliction manifesting in horrible skin diseases, is of course nothing like a highly contagious novel corona virus. However, strikingly similar to Covid19 is the treatment prescribed. Firstly by the reigning Priest (Cohen) and more recently by Dan Andrews and Jenny Mikakos.

Terms such as “social distancing”, “quarantine-ing” and “self-isolation” which until recently were unfamiliar to us, are all concepts drawn from this week’s double Parasha.

Those afflicted with Tzara’at were commanded to keep physical distance by (at least) four amot (cubits) from others, call it 1.5m, even if shpatzeiring around Caulfield Park.

Moreover, if afflicted with Tzara’at, you were required to leave the camp for 7 days, then if not cured a further 7 days outside the camp was required. 14 days of self-isolation entirely alone was required, even with the daily portion of maan, Uber Eats or Deliveroo it’s a difficult task even for the most stoic.

Some 59 of Tazria’s 67 p’sukim (sentences) are filled with all manner of gross details of scabs, skin eruptions, discolorations, swelling, rashes, weeping sores, scaly inflammations, all with yellow black or white hairs.

Thankfully the Torah moves on and deals with the cleansing rituals of the afflicted (the Metzora). The rabbis teach that the reason for the affliction is the name itself “Motzi -Ra” one who utters evil or bad, a clear allusion to lashon hara.

The Tzara’at affliction is a physical representation of the offender’s idle gossip and chatter, as is the affliction of their clothing, their possessions and even the walls of their home. A glaring and obvious reminder to all not only to avoid idle gossip, but to be aware of the insidious and damaging nature of gossip and wicked speech.

Thankfully if the Metzora repents for their sins, they will be fully cured, their body, clothes possessions and home would also be cured and cleansed of the Tzara’at.

So in a time of hyper-cleansing, where hands, benches and supermarket trolleys are sanitised and cleansed, where soap and hand wash are prized possessions, this week’s Parashiot and their striking messages for our time are worth remembering.

At a time of increased vulnerability, extra stress, economic and social pressures and of course serious health concerns, the Torah teaches us kindness above all, to speak and treat each other benevolently, kindly and with care and patience.

To be particularly mindful of our actions and of course our words. To treat those around us, those we love with compassion and generosity.

Pick up the phone and check in on a friend or relative, or perhaps more critically show kindness and consideration to those less close, those outside your immediate circle, provide support any way you can and stave off loneliness for those in isolation or alone.

And lastly like the changing colour of the walls of the house of the Metzora, be the example for your community show the care and love that we stand for and for which our community is renowned.

Stay safe, be well and shabbat shalom.

Osher

מִוֶּת וְחַיִּים בְּיַד-לָשׁוֹן וְאֹהֲבֶיהָ יֵאָכֵל פְּרִיָּהּ

Death and life are in the power of the tongue; Those who love it will eat its fruit.

(משלי י"ח:כא Proverbs 18:21)